

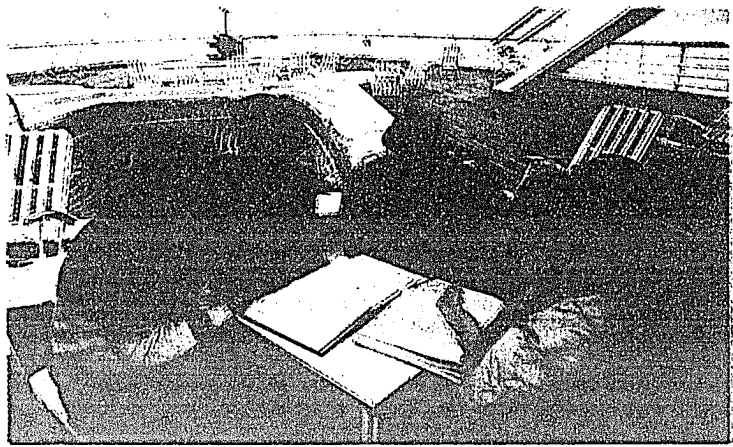
(Right) Departure:
The Mediterranean Sky sets sail
with 532 emigrants from Odessa.

(Below) Representatives
of Shvut Ami teach new immigrants
about Judaism.

(Bottom) On sunny days,
the immigrants could be found
on deck enjoying the voyage.



OPERATION SOUL-SAVERS



Hundreds of Jews from the former Soviet Union on a boat to Israel did not know that evangelical and Orthodox Jewish volunteers were fighting over them. **Alisa Odenheimer** traveled on the third voyage of Operation Exodus.

Photos: Ricky Rosen

The Love Boat it wasn't. In fact, at times, the tension on the Mediterranean Sky was so high that it almost seemed that the boat might snap in half, with each part sailing off in its own direction. Never mind the calm blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea, the beauty of the Greek Islands drifting by, the gentle warmth of the sun and the soft caress of the breeze on deck. On board, a terrible storm raged.

On January 6, we set sail from Haifa aboard the Mediterranean Sky on a mission to return with 532 immigrants from Odessa. This was the last of three experimental voyages sponsored by Operation Exodus, a joint effort of two evangelical Christian groups. The voyages were arranged in conjunction with Odessa-Israel, a group of Israel businessmen, and with the help of Ofek - Ride to Freedom, an Israeli non-profit organization.

The Exodus group planned to use the experimental voyages as a model for a 50-voyage operation, bringing a total of 25,000 olim to Israel at a cost of \$10 million to \$12 million.

But after the first two voyages, the Exodus group faced rumors that their people had missionized on board, rumors that threatened future Absorption Ministry cooperation.

As on the first two voyages, the government sent a large staff of absorption officials, customs officers and medical personnel, everyone need-

ed to process the immigrants on board and make sure that everything ran smoothly.

As on the first two voyages, Operation Exodus had a 30-member team of Christians and messianic Jews on board, including eight who live in Israel. This time, they were not alone.

Absorption Minister Yitzhak Peretz (Shas) sent 10 haredi representatives, mostly immigrants from the former Soviet Union, to observe the situation, as well as to work with the immigrants. Ofek sent a delegation of "knitted-kippa" Orthodox volunteers to lend a hand with the immigrant children and see whether there was any truth to the rumors of missionary activity on board.

The Exodus group invited journalists from the mainstream Israeli press to see for themselves what was going on aboard ship. A reporter from the ultra-Orthodox paper, *Yated Ne'eman*, affiliated with the Degel Hatorah party, and another from the evangelical *Prophecy Today* came along.

The ship with its varied mix of passengers became a pressure-cooker of marathon arguments and increasingly open bitterness. After a few days, people on both sides suggested throwing members of the "opposing" camp overboard. They were only half kidding.

It started a day or two out of Haifa, long before the olim got on board. The believers, who had taken care of the olim for the first two



voyages of the Greek-registered Mediterranean Sky, came aboard prepared for the same role on the third voyage: organizing children's activities, handing out disposable diapers and baby formula to mothers and teaching the new immigrants basic Hebrew songs.

The Jewish Agency had refused to go along, but Peretz agreed to cooperate in the three experimental voyages and sent along a staff of civil servants to take care of the absorption process on board. The Exodus group, for its part, had signed a written agreement not to engage in any missionary work with the new immigrants, before, during or after the voyage.

Peretz's delegation, most of which was from the Shvut Ami yeshiva for Soviet immigrants, was also sent to provide the immigrants with some rudimentary knowledge of Judaism and Israel. Some team members said that, if they managed to attract new students to the yeshiva, that would be OK too.

The Ofek team was led by organization founder Mickey Wassertal. Together with friends, Wassertal left his teaching job to found the non-profit organization aimed at stepping up the pace of immigration by opening more routes out of the former Soviet Union. Wassertal's group had been involved in the land arrangements for Exodus II, including getting the immigrants from

their homes to the port in Odessa.

Wassertal said he had heard the rumors of missionary work as well, and decided to come on board to see for himself. He brought with him seven students in their early 20s, including several immigrants from the former Soviet Union, to organize children's activities.

"The Bible says the Gentiles – not the Jewish Agency – should bring the Jews back to Israel," Operation Exodus leader Gustav Scheller, a Swiss national who owns a travel agency, said.

Operation Exodus is a joint effort of the British Ebenezer Emergency Fund and the US Exodus II evangelical groups.

The Exodus group insisted repeatedly that its only interest was transporting the Jews to Israel, in fulfillment of the Biblical prophecy and as a way of hastening the return of Jesus. Steve Lightle, who leads Operation Exodus with Scheller, explained that, according to his theology, once the Jews are in Israel, the Lord will then "do something" to make them see the light. He emphasized that convincing the Jews to accept Jesus is God's responsibility, and is not part of the Operation Exodus agenda.

The two Jewish groups found this hard to swallow. They wanted to know why, if all the Exodus group wanted to do was help transport the Jews to Israel, didn't it just make out a check. Why were 30 Exodus members, eight

from Israel, on board? If they were not missionaries, why were seven Jews among them?

"For 2,000 years, we have not seen very much Christian love for Jews. So you can imagine our misgivings," Wassertal explained in a tense meeting with Exodus group leaders early in the journey.

The haredi and Ofek teams set out to reduce the Exodus group's access to the immigrants, reducing potential influence on them. From the very beginning of the journey, they told the Christians and messianic Jews that they would handle everything themselves, from children's activities to adult education.

The Exodus group, anxious that Peretz receive a positive report on their activities, accepted the conditions.

But the problem continued to fester, especially after the olim boarded. The Exodus group won some rounds, the Jewish groups others.

"The [Exodus group's] main purpose was to make themselves known to the people on board, to cement relationships for the future," charged Haim Burshtein, the 25-year-old leader of the Shvut Ami contingent, at the end of the voyage.

Burshtein, who was arrested by the KGB at the age of 15 for Zionist activity, spoke with

an assuredness and relentless logic that made you almost sorry for the hapless KGB agent who had the misfortune to interrogate him.

"They have plans to keep in touch with [the immigrants] and possibly offer them employment," he continued. "They are trying to wage a war, to get more and more people under their influence.

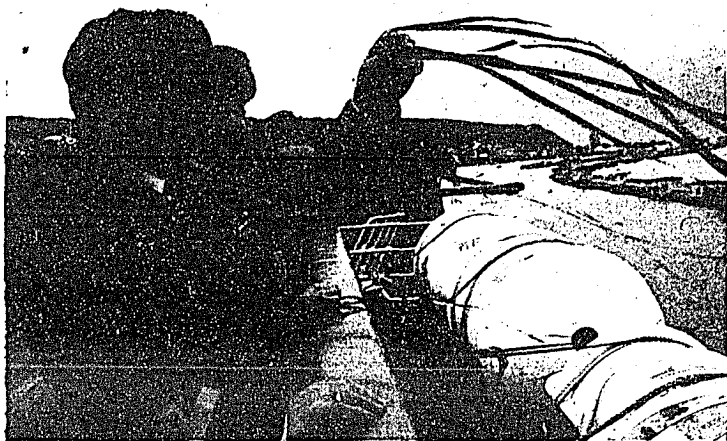
"In fact, I suggested to one of the leaders of the group that they change their name from 'Exodus II' to 'Crusades VI.'"

Wassertal – tall, thin, intense – was less biting, but no less upset. "It's playing with fire," he said, shaking his head warily. He expressed fear that the project would be used by Exodus II as a promotional tool. "Lightle can go and tell the world that his group is helping Israel. This could give him credit with Jews who are far from Judaism."

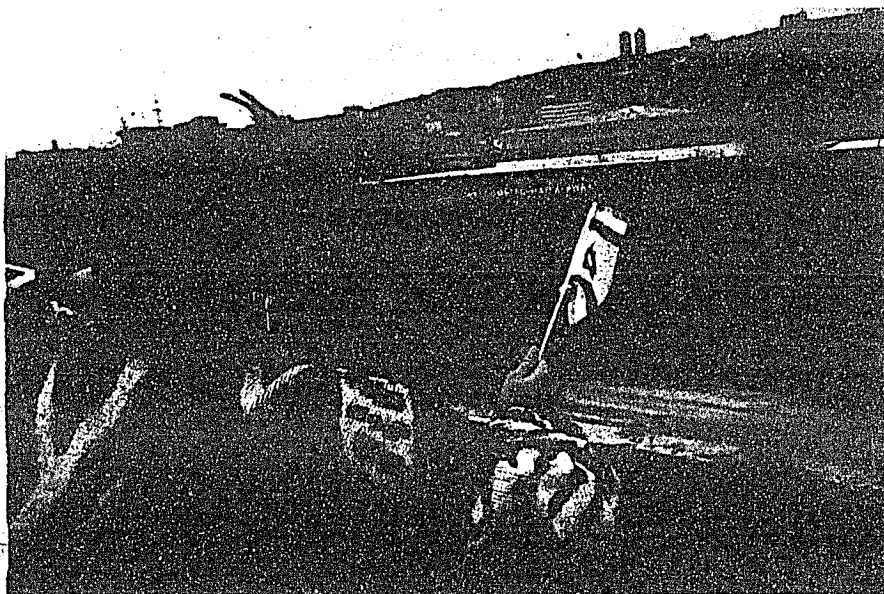
The Exodus volunteers disputed the allegations.

"I felt deeply hurt," Scheller said in a press briefing two days before we reached Haifa. "We put so much effort into collecting the funds for this project. We are not asking anyone for thanks, but sometimes, when we get kicked in the bottom, it hurts.

"We have been made scapegoats, because



Arrival in Haifa:
The immigrants
themselves
seemed oblivious
to the battles
that were waged
around them and
were simply happy
to be in Israel.



we are Christians. It's easy to accuse us of being missionaries. But when I ask for specifics, I never get any hard answers."

If the presence of a large contingent of Christians and messianic Jews was the one thing that would block the government's continued participation in the project, would he consider cutting down the number to a bare minimum?

Scheller, a slim, silver-haired man with a gentle but energetic manner, paused before answering: "I would have to ask the Lord about that."

The new immigrants themselves seemed oblivious to the battle being waged over their souls. They gratefully accepted the refreshments handed to them by the believers as they staggered up the gangplank, some having slept in the customs building for as long as three nights. They crowded into lectures on Judaism led by the Shvut Ami team.

They participated with equal gusto at sing-alongs led by the Jewish groups and those led by the Exodus group, clapping their hands if they were unfamiliar with the songs. They

consulted with Russian-speaking members of all the groups indiscriminately about where to settle in Israel, what the job market was like and a million other concerns.

On sunny days, the emigrants could be found stretched out on deck chairs, strolling around the ship, walking their dogs or simply gazing out to sea. In one lounge, the Ofek volunteers entertained 40 or 50 children at a time, providing them with paper and crayons, playing games like "Simon Says" and showing Russian-language cartoons. In the other, the adults watched Abba Eban's *Heritage* TV series on video, listened to lectures or shmoozed.

In an ad-hoc branch of the Absorption Ministry set up in the ship's casino, they waited in line patiently, sometimes consulting maps of Israel hung on the wall, asking Israelis on board to point out one town or another. At night, the teenagers danced in a disco set up by the Greek crew. Above all, the olim slept, exhausted from the ordeal of packing their belongings, the trip to Odessa, the four- to five-day wait for the boat and the grueling customs search.

The emigrants had been given a sheet of paper upon boarding which stated that the cost of chartering the boat had been covered by donations from Christians. But few immigrants took notice, and most were too concerned with their own problems to care who had sponsored the trip.

I asked one immigrant from Kiev who had bothered to read the handout what she thought about the fact that the Christians had donated the money for her trip.

"It is very appropriate," she said. "The Christians have done so much bad to our people over the years that it is right that they should do this good thing for us now." Did she see any danger of potential missionary activity? She seemed unworried: "I trust the Israeli government. They must know what they are doing."

The worst friction during the boat journey arose over the Exodus group's request to hold a memorial service for the passengers of the Struma. The ship carrying illegal Jewish refugees sank in the Black Sea in February 1942 after British authorities refused to allow it through the Dardanelles on its way to Palestine.

The Exodus group included a large contingent of British citizens, who proposed holding a service in which they would tell the olim the Struma story, ask all Jews present for their forgiveness and throw a wreath into the ocean. Shmuel Levine, the lawyer for Exodus, suggested that a representative from Shvut Ami say kaddish as well.

But the two Jewish groups were not having any of this. They suggested that the Exodus group hold its ceremony on the way to Odessa or privately on the return trip, without the participation of the olim.

The Shvut Ami and Ofek teams did not want the olim burdened with the tragedy; instead, the staff had to cheer them up after their ordeal of reaching the boat. They rejected the wreath-throwing ceremony as foreign to Jewish tradition. They pointed out that the group had no authority to ask for forgiveness and that the Jews on board had no authority to grant it. And, most important of all, they wanted to keep the Exodus group away from the olim.

In the end, after days of bitter argument, the Struma ceremony was held privately, without an announcement inviting the emigrants to attend. Only a handful who happened to be strolling on deck observed it.

In the freezing Black Sea wind, with drops of rain wetting their faces, the British believers on board, flanked by the Greek crew in dress uniform, stood in a semi-circle, as one of their members read from a prepared statement. A moment of silence was observed. One woman could not hold back her tears, sobbing silently. At the end of the ceremony, the British believers exchanged tearful hugs with the messianic Jews in their group, rocking back and forth for long minutes.

"I understand the wreath sank like a stone the minute it hit the water," Burshtein said.

I asked what he meant. Burshtein laughed. "It's just my private interpretation," he said, "but to me it means the sin was not forgiven." ◇

